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Designing Prison Based Parenting Programs to Maximise their Outcomes

Butler, M., Percy, A., Hayes, D., & John Devaney (2019). Designing Prison Based Parenting Programs to Maximise their Outcomes. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, 63(7), 975-992. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0306624X18811590>

Published in:

International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Queen's University Belfast - Research Portal:

[Link to publication record in Queen's University Belfast Research Portal](#)

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Designing prison based parenting programs to maximize their outcomes.

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Abstract

Parenting programs are increasingly being offered in prison as governments seek to reduce the negative consequences of parental imprisonment and encourage desistance from crime. However, little is known about the design and delivery of such programs and how this may shape program effectiveness. This paper seeks to address this gap by examining how the design and delivery of the Families Matter program for imprisoned adult fathers in Northern Ireland affected its ability to achieve its goals of improving family relationships and fathers' parenting skills. Examples of good practice are offered, as well as challenges that remain to be overcome. It is argued that more attention needs to be paid to the design and delivery of these programs if their ability to achieve long term improvements in family relationships and parenting skills are to be improved.

Keywords: corrections; parenting programs; rehabilitation; treatment effectiveness; program design and implementation; Northern Ireland.

Designing prison based parenting programs to maximize their outcomes.

Prison based parenting programs are growing in popularity (Armstrong, Eggins, Reid, Harnett, & Dawe, 2017; Loper & Tuerk, 2006). The aims of these programs vary but generally include improving the parenting skills of imprisoned parents, strengthening family relationships, minimizing the negative effects of parental imprisonment for children and adults, as well as helping to reduce reoffending (Armstrong et al., 2017; Buston, Parkes, Thomson, Wight, & Fenton, 2012; Loper & Tuerk, 2006). Studies have found that these programs can be beneficial in enhancing parenting knowledge and family relationships (Armstrong et al., 2017; Boswell, Poland, & Price, 2010; Buston et al., 2012; Loper & Tuerk, 2006; Purvis, 2013). However, questions remain over their long term effectiveness (Armstrong et al., 2017). These programs have also been found to vary significantly in their theoretical underpinnings, design, implementation and impact (Armstrong et al., 2017; Loper & Tuerk, 2006; Purvis, 2013). Research on offender interventions more generally has found that program effectiveness is influenced by a number of factors but, in particular, program design and delivery (Andrews et al., 1990; Durlak & DuPre, 2008; Gendreau, Little, & Goggin, 1996; Lipsey, 2009). Yet, despite the growing number of prison based parenting programs, little is known about how their design and delivery may affect their potential effectiveness.

This paper begins to address this gap by providing an in-depth exploration of key features of the design and implementation of one prison based parenting program, the Families Matter program in Maghaberry Prison, Northern Ireland, and how these features influenced effective change in its participants.

Prison Based Parenting Programs

Prison based parenting programs are increasingly popular due to their perceived ability to enhance parenting skills and lessen some of the negative effects of parental imprisonment (Boswell et al., 2010; Buston et al., 2012; Loper & Tuerk, 2006; Purvis, 2013). Previous research has identified the potential for parental imprisonment to negatively affect child outcomes in both the immediate and longer term, including child wellbeing, social exclusion, psychopathology, behavioral difficulties, poor educational attainment and criminality (Murray & Farrington, 2008; Murray & Murray, 2010; Wildeman, 2014). Yet, the extent to which parental imprisonment can result in negative effects can vary between different jurisdictions, depending on specific social welfare systems, penal policies governing family contact and prison conditions (Besemer, van der Geest, Murray, Bijleveld, & Farrington, 2011; Murray, Janson, & Farrington, 2007).

There is also a growing interest in strengthening the family relationships of those in prison, as strong family bonds have been found to reduce reoffending, encourage desistance and lessen prison misconduct (Brunton-Smith & McCarthy, 2017; Cochran, 2012). Parenting programs have the potential to disrupt the intergenerational transmission of offending behavior through improving family functioning, both during the period of incarceration and post release. Poor family functioning has been found to play an important role in facilitating the continuity of offending from incarcerated parents to their children (Auty, Farrington, & Coid, 2015). Similarly, community based parenting programs have been shown to be an effective evidence-based intervention to reduce anti-social behavior and delinquency in children and teenagers (Piquero et al., 2016). However, in a recent meta-analysis, Armstrong and colleagues (2017) found significant heterogeneity in the outcomes of prison based parenting programs, which they concluded was partly due to variations in program design and delivery. Research by Henson (2017) suggests that such heterogeneity in outcomes may be due to a failure to properly identify program outcomes, and underlying program logic, with

key stakeholders prior to undertaking a program evaluation. Henson (2017) argues that this can result in important outcomes being missed or not captured in such research. Variations in program design and delivery have been widely acknowledged within the research literature (Armstrong et al., 2017; Buston et al., 2012; Loper & Tuerk, 2006; Purvis, 2013). Armstrong and colleagues (2017) argued that such variations made it difficult to identify effective program components and suggested that a clearer articulation of the underlying logic of these programs (i.e. what changes they intend to promote and how their design and delivery would trigger change) was essential.

As a result, there is little consensus as to the key features of prison based parenting programs that promote active change within participants. Drawing on other areas of the criminal justice system, studies have found that the most effective offender rehabilitation and treatment programs tend to be those carefully designed to address the risks and needs of program participants and delivered with high fidelity and responsivity (Andrews et al., 1990; Durlak & DuPre, 2008; Gendreau et al., 1996; Lowenkamp, Latessa, & Smith, 2006). Risks and needs refers to the requirement to match program intensity and content to the level of risk posed by program participants, as well as the criminogenic needs they present (Andrews et al., 1990). Responsivity refers to the matching of program style and mode of delivery to the learning style and abilities of participants (Andrews et al., 1990). Program fidelity can also influence program effectiveness (Durlak & DuPre, 2008; Lowenkamp et al., 2006). Ensuring that programs are delivered according to their original design, that staff are properly trained, that organizations have the capacity to deliver programs, that other policies, funding decisions or practices are not undermining the delivery of programs or their sustainability, as well as ensuring good interagency cooperation and collaboration may all mediate program outcomes (August, Bloomquist, Lee, Realmuto, & Joel, 2006; Durlak & DuPre, 2008; Lowenkamp et al., 2006). Together these elements of program development and

implementation form what can be referred to as the program's 'theory/mechanisms of action' - the underlying logic and understanding of how program design and delivery is intended to trigger change (Parsons, Shils, & Smelser, 2001). However, there is a relative dearth of studies examining the mechanisms of program action within criminal justice system interventions (Armour & Sliva, 2018). This is particularly concerning as governments are increasingly attempting to use prison based parenting programs to reduce the negative consequences of parental imprisonment and encourage desistance from crime without adequately understanding their 'theory/mechanisms of action'.

Families Matter Program

Historically, the Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS) has experienced considerable challenges due to the political conflict in Northern Ireland, which has contributed to a more restrictive, security focused penal regime (Butler, 2016). While NIPS has undergone recent reforms to try to move away from this legacy of conflict, Maghaberry prison remains the only high security adult male prison in Northern Ireland and political prisoners continue to be held there (Butler, 2016). At the time of the research, the Families Matter program was a 17 week residential parenting program (i.e. the program operates on a specialist wing of the prison containing only program participants), jointly developed by Barnardo's Northern Ireland (NI) (a leading children's charity) and NIPS. It is open to fathers on remand and sentenced, and seeks to improve family relationships by increasing the frequency and quality of family contact, as well as strengthen fathers' parenting skills via their participation in a range of parenting focused classes and activities. All fathers are eligible to voluntarily apply to take part in the program if they are imprisoned for the duration of the program, are drug free, adhering to prison rules, do not pose a security risk and have not been charged with a sexual offence (see Butler, Hayes, Devaney, & Percy, 2015). Potential participants undergo an assessment process conducted jointly by Barnardo's NI and NIPS, and if accepted in the

program, they are helped to adjust to it with the assistance of peer mentors who are previous program participants (Butler et al., 2015). Peer mentors helped program participants to adjust to the program by encouraging them to open up and share their parenting experiences, participate in classes and cultivate a culture of peer support (Butler et al., 2017). Family contact is increased by providing fathers with extra telephone access and special monthly family visits, in addition to their normal prison visits (Butler et al., 2015). In comparison to the normal prison visits, fathers are allowed to move freely around the visiting facility with their children, enabling fathers to run, lift, walk around the room holding hands with their children, play games with them and eat together as a family (Butler et al., 2015). Classes and activities are delivered by a range of providers, including Barnardo's NI, NIPS, Belfast Metropolitan College and the Public Health Agency (Butler et al., 2015). However, Barnardo's NI and NIPS staff oversee the delivery of the program and provide most of its classes and activities, with NIPS and Barnardo's NI staff being specifically trained to undertake this role (Butler et al., 2015).

This paper will begin to address the gap in our knowledge regarding how the design and delivery of a prison based parenting program can influence effective change in its participants. By providing an in-depth exploration of how the design and delivery of the Families Matter program in Northern Ireland influenced its ability to achieve its intended outcomes of improving family relationships and enhancing fathers' parenting skills, this paper will answer Armstrong and colleagues (2017) call for a better articulation of the underlying logic of prison based parenting programs so that the effectiveness of these programs can be maximized. In contrast to the focus on parenting attitudes, knowledge and behaviors amongst much of the existing research in this area, this paper contributes to new knowledge by developing a preliminary theory of action for how one prison based parenting program triggered change in its participants.

Method

Research Design

A mixed methods research design combining observations and interviews was used in this research. Over 100 hours of observations were conducted to observe program content and delivery, as well as how fathers, families and staff responded to the program. In-depth semi-structured interviews were also conducted with 42 individuals to explore their experiences in the program and their responses to it. Eighteen fathers, seven family members and 17 staff agreed to be interviewed. All fathers were interviewed twice (halfway through the program and on completion) to assess if their responses changed over time, while family members and staff were interviewed once on program completion. Ethical approval to conduct the study was granted by Queen's University Belfast.

Procedure

Participants were recruited through the Families Matter program and were informed of the study using a combination of verbal announcements, information sheets and information sessions. All potential participants were aware that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study or refuse to answer any question at any stage, without any negative consequences for themselves, their families or their involvement in the program. Only limited anonymity and confidentiality was offered as incidents of staff malpractice, attempts to escape or commit harm to oneself/another had to be reported to a relevant authority. However, no such disclosures were made during the course of this research. The limited anonymity and confidentiality was stressed to all potential participants before they decided to participate. All but one of the fathers (18 of 19) agreed to participate and all staff took part. Thirteen family members initially agreed to participate but

five did not respond to subsequent efforts to contact them, leaving seven family members in the final sample.

Data Analysis

A theory of action approach was used to analyze and interpret the observations so as to link program components and activities to their actual and potential impact on fathers, families and staff. As previously stated, theory of action involves examining how the design and delivery of a program is supposed to trigger change in program participants (Parson, Shils, & Smelser, 2001). Interviews were transcribed and entered into NVivo for analysis. Using thematic analysis, interview transcripts were then analyzed to identify recurring themes emerging from the participants' accounts. Thematic analysis involves the identification, analysis and reporting of patterns/themes in qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The findings of the observations were crosschecked with the interview findings to ensure that the claims and conclusions drawn from the data were accurate and supported by the data. This process is known as triangulation and involves checking the reliability and credibility of research findings by comparing whether the use of two or more different methodological approaches results in similar findings (Bryman, 2008). All quotes have been anonymized to protect participant anonymity and confidentiality, and are included in the findings below because they best exemplify the themes being discussed.

Findings

Improving Family Relationships

Comprehensive family-involved assessment: While all imprisoned fathers could apply to take part in the Families Matter program, applicants had to undergo an assessment process before being accepted. This assessment, conducted jointly by Barnardo's NI and NIPS staff, assessed the risk, needs and responsivity of fathers, their ability to adhere to the conditions of

the program, as well as their relationship with their families. This joint approach encouraged interagency cooperation and information-sharing, ensuring that decisions were taken together and drew on the expertise of each organization to challenge each other and promote the best match between the program, fathers and families. However, organizational differences in the assessment process were noted. Barnardo's NI staff tended to focus on the needs of the fathers, their family relationships and the extent to which the mode of delivery of the parenting classes would match the fathers' learning style and needs. Barnardo's NI staff placed considerable value on consulting with family members seeking their views regarding their family relationships and their willingness to engage with the program. NIPS staff, in contrast, concentrated on the fathers' risk level and ability to adhere to the requirements of the program, which included being drug free, adhering to prison rules and avoiding engaging in prison misconduct. Both NIPS and Barnardo's NI could judge a father ineligible and, while this happened infrequently, when it did occur, it tended to be because NIPS was worried about the level of risk posed by fathers and their ability to avoid engaging in misconduct.

Fostering a culture of change amongst fathers: While the comprehensive family-involved assessment meant that a number of eligible fathers were excluded from the program, participating fathers and their families welcomed this approach. Fathers felt this assessment process assisted them in engaging with the program as those on the program were all motivated 'like-minded' peers. They explained that the presence of 'like-minded' peers reduced displays of hyper-masculinity and encouraged a rehabilitative culture of peer support, helping them to be more open to discussing their experiences and sharing their problems on the program:

"I think that's what makes the difference [...] because in the other [parts of the prison] you don't want to talk about your problems [...] but here everybody is in the same boat [...] so I think it is a bit easier to talk." (Participant 2 - Father)

Early engagement with families: For family members, being consulted during the assessment process encourages greater interaction and supportive communication between families and program staff. Families felt involved in the rehabilitation process, developed relationships with program staff, and had a greater knowledge of the program and fathers progress. In this way, families were actively involved in encouraging fathers to engage with the program and, at times, worked alongside staff to challenge fathers' cognitions, behaviors and emotions. This reduced families' fears about fathers' safety and wellbeing, as well as reassured families that fathers were attempting to change, encouraging them to maintain contact and continue visitation:

“It [relationships between staff and families] has probably made it [father-family relationships] stronger, because, well anytime in the other houses [elsewhere in the prison] I was passing drug tests, I think she [partner] was going, ‘Aye dead on, I’m sure you were’. But they [family] know if you fail a drug test over here [on Families Matter program]. Your family gets contacted. So they haven’t been contacted so she knows. She believes me now that I am not taking stuff [drugs].” (Participant 8 – Father)

Promoting and facilitating family contact: Given that imprisonment restricts contact with the outside community and Maghaberry prison is a high security prison with strict rules regarding visitation and telephone access, building in extra opportunities for family contact was viewed as an essential component of the program. For this reason, fathers were permitted more frequent and longer access to telephones than was normally allowed. Prior to the program, fathers reported only having access to the telephone for five minutes per day. However on the program, fathers could access the telephone in the morning, afternoon and evening, potentially spending up to 60 minutes talking to their families per day. Program staff were also in frequent contact with family members, helping to alleviate worries and pass

messages between families and fathers. Fathers and families greatly valued these efforts by program staff to facilitate communication and maintain family contact:

“It is totally different in a good way. The staff [...] like if you need something, if you have no credit and someone is sick [...] they do help you like. [...] I think there is good effort put in by the prison staff.” (Participant 8 – Father)

““Their staff are fantastic. [...] You automatically feel a sense of relief because it is somebody you have come across, and you are not speaking to a stranger. [...] It has helped us so much” (Participant 37 – Family member)

Moreover, special monthly family visits were organized which lasted significantly longer than standard prison visits (4hrs v’s 1hr) and allowed fathers to move and interact with their children in a way that was not permitted during the normal prison visits. These extra opportunities for family contact were believed to be key for helping to improve father-family relationships as they provided an opportunity for fathers engage fully in parenting in a way that would not have been possible during the normal prison visits or telephone contact.

During the normal prison visits, fathers were restricted in their movements which limited their ability to interact with their children and apply the skills they were learning in their parenting classes. Moreover, the noise in the standard prison visits, restrictions placed on fathers’ movements, rules governing their interactions with children, as well as concerns about what children might witness during these visits, contributed to strained father-family interactions due to the added stresses and strains it placed on families. These experiences discouraged some family members from attending the normal prison visits and could potentially lead to relationship breakdown.

“The [normal] visits before the Family Matters program were stressful, very short, very upsetting. [...] He wasn’t allowed off the seat, [...] the noise in the room [...].

You could have been sitting in the visiting room and maybe somebody was trying to pass something [...] and they [prison staff] just would have dragged the prisoner out and the child could have seen violence.” (Participant 42 – Family member)

“She [daughter] has said to me a few times “Daddy I don’t want to go to them wee [normal] visits again because they are too noisy”. But I end up coaxing her and saying “I have loads of sweeties love, for you”.” (Participant 17 - Father)

The limited standard access to telephones also restricted the amount of time fathers could talk to families, which constrained their ability to improve family relations and parent their children.

“The phone calls at the start were very limited and that sort of made it very difficult and left the children a bit traumatised but that’s [...] prison.” (Participant 1 - Father)

For most fathers, the telephone was the primary means through which they parented their children in between visits. As a result, fathers and families greatly valued the extra opportunities for family contact provided by the program and credited these opportunities (along with their newly acquired parentings skills) with improving their family relationships.

“We are a lot more happy. [...] [Without the Families Matter program] maybe we wouldn’t be together. [...] We could have drifted [apart]. [...] Because they [normal prison visits] are so stressful [...] you know, I mightn’t have went up every week. The family visit like nearly made you go up.” (Participant 40 - Family member)

The provision of these extra opportunities provided a more positive environment for families to communicate, which helped them to rebuild and/or improve family relationships:

“It has just built that bond back, because he [father] was losing it with [child]. [...]

Whenever [father] went inside [to prison] [...] he [child] hated [father]. [...] With the [family] visits they regained it again.” (Participant 41 - Family member)

Consistent staffing: It was the initial intention of program stakeholders that all staff working on the Families Matters wing, both internal prison and external Barnardo’s staff, would be fully trained in the program. While NIPS attempted to ensure that NIPS program staff were always scheduled to work on the Family Matters wing, this did not always happen due to shift patterns, holiday leave, illness and personnel gaps elsewhere in the prison. This meant that sometimes NIPS staff who were unfamiliar with the program were being expected to facilitate its delivery, despite their lack of knowledge and training. As a result, these staff did not always appreciate how the provision of additional telephone access or the passing of messages between fathers and families was key to achieving the program’s objective of improving family relationships. This meant that on days when unfamiliar and untrained staff were assigned to the program wing, the opportunities fathers and families had to contact each other were often reduced to pre-program levels.

At the time of research, many NIPS staff had limited knowledge of the program, including NIPS prison managers. This affected the delivery of the program as there was frequent turnover among NIPS prison managers, which meant that new NIPS managers assigned to oversee the Families Matter program were often unfamiliar with it and initially reluctant to provide the additional resources required to deliver the program as originally intended:

“Since [senior prison managers familiar with the program] left we had a lot of cancellations [classes and resources being withdrawn]. [...] It [Families Matter program] is still not quite as good as it should be.” (Participant 19 – Staff)

Financial resources: The issue of class cancelations was amplified during times of fiscal restraint within NIPS. Prison managers unfamiliar with the program appeared to be more inclined to prioritize traditional prison practices over the delivery of the program when resources were limited. During the observations, budget restrictions prohibiting staff overtime, resulted in NIPS program staff being re-assigned to other duties within the prison, causing program classes and activities to be cancelled, fathers locked in their cells and telephone access restricted. This began to reduce the fathers' motivation to engage and created antagonism between fathers and staff:

“It sets [us] back [...]. So if [we] are being locked up [...] why commit yourself to something that isn't, if they [prison managers] are not committed to delivering the promise of being allowed out and using the phones, so why should I [commit to change]? That's the attitude that will come back. [...] Why should I do this for you if you are not doing that? It is a tit-for-tat situation.” (Participant 9 - Father)

Inmate progression: In addition, one of the key weaknesses identified within the program was the failure by NIPS to plan how the changes in family relationships fostered during program participation would be maintained and consolidated beyond the completion of the program. During the 17 weeks fathers were in the program, the provision of extra opportunities for family contact improved family relationships and was monitored by program staff. Fathers and families were aware their contact was being monitored so that program staff could provide advice and feedback on their rehearsal of the new parenting skills they were acquiring. Yet, after the 17 weeks, it was expected that fathers and families would continue to maintain these improvements, despite returning to pre-program levels of contact, which would again expose them to the stresses and strains associated with normal prison visits and telephone access. Program staff, fathers and families all thought this was

unrealistic and undermined the program's ability to achieve long term outcomes, as the gains made during the program were undone:

“It [no longer having access to the extra opportunities for family contact on the program] is having an impact on [daughter] [...] it is definitely causing problems between me and the child. [...] She gets upset and then I get annoyed and [partner] gets annoyed, and it just has an impact. [...] You are building a very good relationship with your child and then bang, you are knocked off it.” (Participant 18 – Father)

Enhancing Parenting Skills

Knowledge and skills training: The program provided of a range of parenting related classes and activities focused on improving fathers' knowledge about child development and appropriate parenting behavior, as well as developing parenting practices and strategies. While Barnardo's NI was the dominant provider of these classes and activities, NIPS, the Belfast Metropolitan College and the Public Health Agency also provided a number of classes and activities. These classes and activities specifically discussed parenting related issues, child development and past experiences of parenting, providing fathers with new skills and techniques to improve their interactions with their family members and help them to become more attuned to identifying and addressing the needs of their children and partners:

“The Barnardo's NI class is brilliant. I've learned a good wee bit from it like. The ages and stages [of children's development] and what I should do, how to discipline them [children] and all. Like I've learned a whole [lot].” (Participant 10 – Father)

However, some fathers (especially those with mental health problems and/or learning difficulties) reported an initial wariness and anxiety about speaking in these classes as they were worried about being judged by others based on their responses:

“But for me, I’ll be honest with you, I hated them [parenting classes] at the start. Not because of actually the way the class is run, but because I don’t like that talking in front of people. [...] I was dreading it like. It actually was... it’s like a phobia. [...] Before my first class I was like having panic attacks. [...] I could feel my heart. I could near feel it in my voice, because it was that bad.” (Participant 15 – Father)

For these individuals, speaking to other fathers who had previously taken part in the program helped to ease their concerns, reassure them, reduce their anxiety and wariness, as well as encourage them to open up and share their experiences.

Peer mentoring: Peer learning was actively encouraged through the use of peer mentors within the program. Peer learning was viewed by staff as important for engaging fathers who had had negative experiences of traditional classroom based teaching, as well as those who may be wary of being ‘lectured to’ about not being a good father. This view was generally supported by fathers:

“I wasn’t going to sit and listen to somebody telling me how to rear my children. That was honestly my sort of thinking at the time. But [...] it’s not like that. [...] It mainly was the [fathers] discussing [...] their own experiences.” (Participant 15 – Father)

Previous program participants were used as peer mentors to help new participants adjust to the program, understand the purpose of the various program components and promote a culture of peer learning, communication and support. Peer mentors reside on the landing with program participants and take part in all program activities, including the family visits and enhanced telephone access. In order to become a peer mentor, past program participants must apply to be considered for this role and go through an interview process with program staff. In this process, applicants are asked to explain their reasons for becoming a peer mentor and their selection depends on their understanding of what is involved in this

role and their potential ability to communicate with and support new program participants. A maximum of four peer mentors are chosen for each program cohort. Peer mentors shared their experiences with new program participants, encouraging them to engage with the program and share their experiences. The residential nature of the program helped this process as through living together and attending the same classes and activities, fathers began to open up to each other, sharing stories about their families and offering each other advice and support. This culture of peer learning and support was viewed as an especially effective means of encouraging self-reflection, change and rehabilitation. Often fathers placed a greater value on this culture than the new knowledge and skills provided by instructors, as instructors were generally viewed as having a ‘rehabilitation’ agenda, while fathers were seen as sharing their honest accounts, free from any political, social or rehabilitative objectives:

“You take more out of another man, [...] another guy sits here under the same circumstances as you, I know what it is like to talk about yourself, so another guy in the same situation, that there is powerful, because you are taking it as, what he is talking about is real. He is not bullshitting. [...] So you treat it with respect, because you wouldn’t want to be disrespected in that way yourself.” (Participant 13 – Father)

Skills practice and rehearsals: The fathers’ parenting skills were also enhanced through the extra opportunities for family contact provided on the program. One of the challenges of providing a parenting program in prison is the limited interaction imprisoned parents have with their children. Having an opportunity to practice new skills is an important component of skill acquisition, so in addition to learning new parenting skills, opportunities to use these new skills need to be provided if these skills are to be retained and used to improve family relationships. Existing restrictions on telephone access and normal prison visits imposed at Maghaberry prison meant that these opportunities were insufficient to allow fathers to practice their newly acquired parenting skills. For example, in the parenting classes,

fathers were often advised to get down on the floor to ensure they were at the child's eye level when speaking to their child but this was not possible in the standard prison visits due to the restrictions placed on fathers' movement and their interactions with children during these visits. However, by providing extra opportunities for family contact on the program (which balanced security concerns with the needs of families), fathers were provided with an opportunity to practice these skills under the supervision of program staff. Fathers were expected to use their new parenting skills when talking to their families on the telephone and during the family visits. Barnardo's NI staff supervised fathers as they practiced these skills, providing one-to-one feedback on their performance. In this way, fathers were able to use their newly acquired parenting skills to improve family relationships, consolidate these new skills and build up their own and their partners' confidence in their ability to parent:

“The best thing about the four hour [family] visit, whatever [father] had learned in the Families Matter program, he was able to put it into practice [...] which was really exciting for him and for her [daughter]. [...] It was really good because it let me see that I could trust [father] with [daughter] [...] I knew he would be OK, he would be able to cope” (Participant 42 - Family member)

Interagency cooperation: Good interagency communication and coordination was essential to program fidelity, ensuring that all non-NIPS providers were security cleared to enter the prison and provide classes and activities as originally intended. However, problems were evident between the different providers, as lines of responsibility were sometimes blurred due to turnover in personnel, miscommunication and misunderstandings about resource requirements. Problems occurred when security clearance was not obtained in time to deliver scheduled classes and activities or when NIPS staffing shortfalls meant that fathers were not unlocked to attend classes and activities. Failing to unlock fathers was particularly problematic for non-NIPS providers as attendance was often used as a contractual

performance measure, so if fathers were not permitted by NIPS to attend these activities (due to staffing shortages), it risked the funding for these activities being withdrawn:

“The resource [a class] was being offered but in actual fact it is a battle. What my equivalent [manager level] who is running education and activity is saying is “I have no problem [...] in sending the teacher to do a class on the Families Matter program but you have to get me a guarantee that that capacity is reached” [i.e. guarantee the fathers will attend the class].” (Participant 21 – Staff)

“It is all down to a numbers game. As I say, if I started with thirty [fathers] and finished with thirty they would be happy.” (Participant 27 – Staff).

While program staff attempted to address these issues by holding regular interagency meetings to improve communication and coordination, as well as ensure attendance at program classes and activities, a particular challenge that continued to hamper their ability to enhance fathers’ parenting skills was the return to pre-program levels of contact on program completion.

Post program consolidation: While on the program, participants were provided with regular opportunities to participate in the parenting of their children and to practice their newly acquired skills during regular telephone calls and extended prison visits. However, once the program was completed the return to pre-program levels of family contact restricted fathers’ abilities to consolidate their parenting skills and limited their ability to use these skills to maintain improvements in their family relationships throughout the remainder of their imprisonment:

“When they [fathers] leave here [Families Matter program] they get nothing. They go back to a one hour [normal] visit a week. [...] When they go back to the normal visits, the fathers aren’t allowed to go off and play with the kids. They have to sit at a table.

So what's the kid to think about that? It does no good. [...] There's no follow up.

[...] There is potential [for change]. But then there's potential for them to go back to what they were doing [before the program]." (Participant 19 – Staff)

Based on these findings, Figure 1 provides a preliminary 'theory of action' for prison based parenting programs. The program design encouraged a holistic, whole family approach by actively involving interagency staff, peers and family members, and focusing on family outcomes rather than solely on fathers or their rehabilitation. The design and delivery of the program triggered change through a comprehensive family-involved assessment which matched the risks, needs and responsivity of fathers and families to program content, engaged families in its delivery and fostered a culture of change and peer support (see Figure 1). Change was also triggered by the use of specially trained staff to deliver the program, the provision of class and activities which increased parenting knowledge and skills and developed fathers' emotional, cognitive and behavior understanding of parenting, as well as the provision of opportunities to rehearse these new skills and use them to improve family relationships (see Figure 1). A less macho culture and the combination of family members, staff and peers challenging the behavior of fathers also helped fathers to become more aware of how their behavior affected others, encouraging them to be more attuned to the needs of others, improving their parenting skills and behavior more generally throughout the program and not just during their visits with their children (see Figure 1).

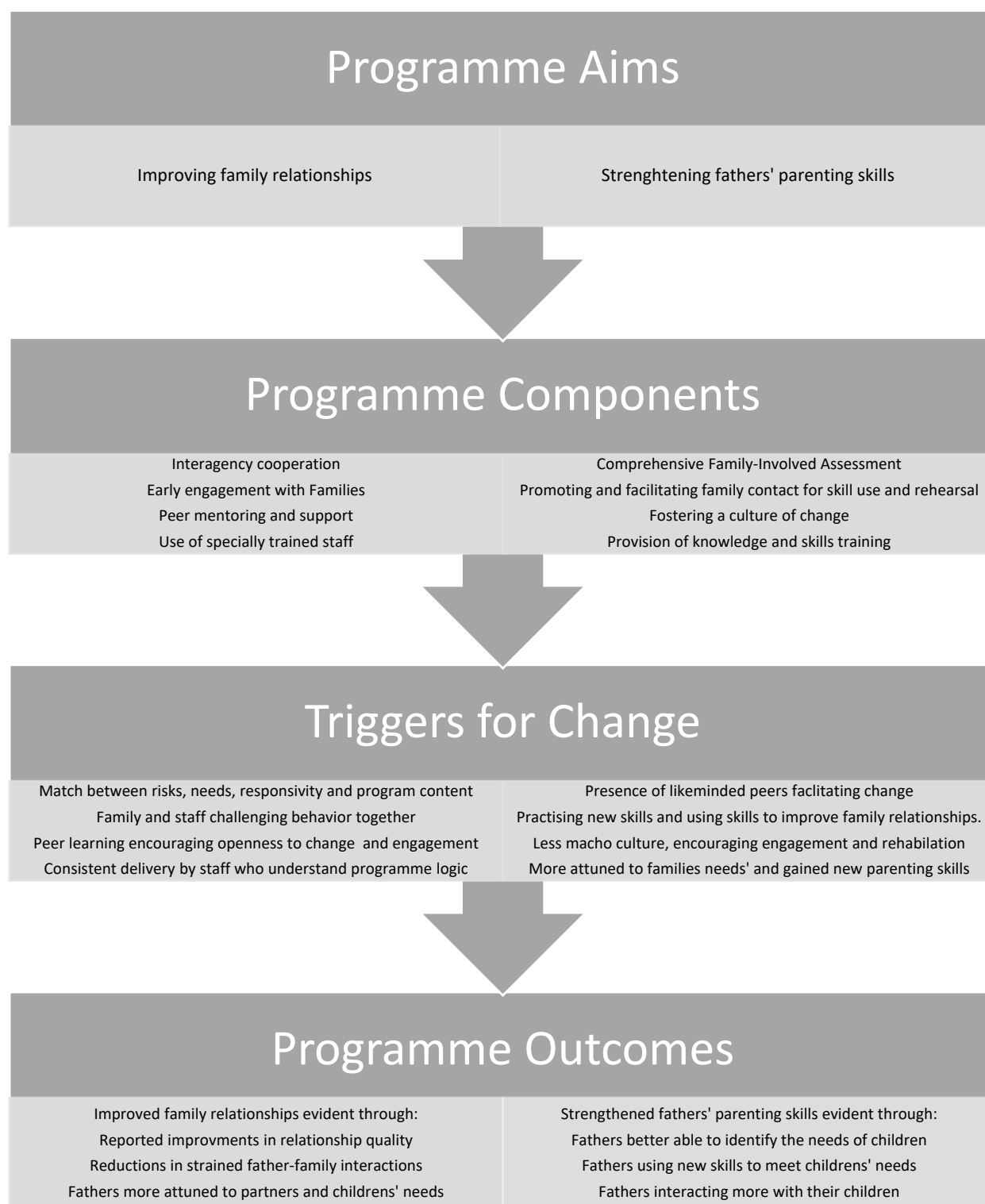


Figure 1: A preliminary theory of action for prison based parenting programs

In this way, the program had been designed to maximize its ability to improve family relationships and strengthen fathers' parenting skills. However, the lack of a clear plan for

how program gains would be maintained beyond program completion, as well as the delivery issues that were being experienced, appeared to limit its potential to turn short term improvements in family relationships and parenting skills into longer term outcomes. Therefore, while the design and delivery of the program demonstrated real potential to maximize program outcomes in the short term, its ability to improve family relationships and fathers' parenting skills in the longer term was being hampered by delivery issues and a lack of a coherent 'end-to-end' (i.e. from entry to exit) approach to prison rehabilitation.

Conclusion

This paper sought to answer Armstrong and colleagues (2017) call for a clearer articulation of the underlying logic of prison based parenting programs so that the effectiveness of these programs could be enhanced. In their meta-analysis, Armstrong and colleagues (2017) identified significant heterogeneity in the effectiveness of prison based parenting programs, arguing that variations in program design and delivery was contributing to this heterogeneity. Drawing on the experience of the Families Matter program in Northern Ireland, this paper developed a theory of action highlighting how program design and delivery can affect its ability to achieve its intended outcomes. Similar to previous research, the findings identified the ability to match the risks, needs and responsivity of participants to program content as being key to its effectiveness, as well as the extent to which programs were implemented as intended. Reaffirming previous research, the findings demonstrate how resourcing challenges, personnel issues, problems with interagency communication and coordination, as well as competing managerial priorities can negatively impact program delivery and effectiveness. However, these findings also offer some insight into how programs can be designed and delivered to maximize their effectiveness. In particular, the holistic, whole family approach emphasizing the needs of families rather than fathers or fathers' offending encouraged program 'buy-in', with the creation of a rehabilitative culture emphasizing peer

learning, support and engagement promoting an openness to change which contributing to a deeper engagement with the program content. The recognition that penal policies governing normal prison visitation and telephone access in Maghaberry prison were insufficient to facilitate the consolidation and acquisition of new parenting skills was also key to maximizing the effectiveness of the program, as otherwise fathers would have not been able to use these skills to improve family relationships or master their performance. These finding therefore have international relevance as they begin to identify some of the strengths and weaknesses associated with the design and delivery of prison based parenting programs, helping to develop our understanding of how prison based programs can be made more effective.

In addition, despite the small scale nature of this study and its limited generalizability, these findings offer some insights into the provision of prison based parenting programs more generally. Firstly, it demonstrates the potential for these programs to engage individuals who may ordinarily be disengaged from rehabilitation programs which are more cognitive behavioral in nature and focused on reducing the criminogenic risk of participants. The focus on family needs combined with a culture of peer learning, engagement and support, appeared to increase the legitimacy of the program for fathers as it was less focused on the ‘rehabilitation’ agenda evident in other programs and more concerned with addressing their needs. This corresponds to previous research viewing rehabilitation as a process of ‘co-production’ with offenders and the importance of offenders feeling that staff care about their ‘real’ needs rather than focusing on predefined targets or objectives, such as reducing reoffending (Crewe, 2007; McNeill, 2006).

Secondly, the findings demonstrate how fathers viewed their participation in the program as an ongoing negotiated process in which their engagement was dependent on the ability of the prison to deliver programs properly and consistently. A failure to do so resulted

in a reduced willingness to engage and adhere to program conditions, referred to as a ‘tit for tat situation’. Recent research reinforces these findings by arguing that a failure to address fundamental problems in the delivery of prison rehabilitation more generally is contributing to increased disengagement and resentment by those imprisoned, resulting in prisons become places of ‘dehabilitation’ rather than ‘rehabilitation’ (Taylor, Burke, Millings, & Ragonese, 2017). Consequently, participant engagement and motivation to comply with program conditions cannot be assumed but needs to be continuously cultivated and maintained through consistent program delivery in a manner which adheres to how the program was originally described to program participants.

Thirdly, these findings also point to the importance of considering how penal policies and practices surrounding visitation and telephone access may impact on the extent to which parents can practice their newly acquired parenting skills and use these skills to improve family relationships. Depending on how restrictive these policies are, action may need to be taken to ensure that imprisoned parents can use the skills they are being taught to improve family relationships and master the performance of these skills, otherwise long term improvements in parenting skills and family relationships are unlikely to be achieved.

Lastly, these findings raise wider concerns about the piecemeal and contradictory nature of prison rehabilitation. Despite NIPS investment in the Families Matter program and commitment to families as being key to facilitating desistance and rehabilitation, their failure to develop a coherent plan for how the short term improvements in family relationships and fathers’ parenting skills could be maintained and progressed beyond program completion undermined the potential long term impact of the program. It seemed unlikely that improvements to family relationships and enhanced parenting skills could be maintained post program completion as fathers and families returned to pre-program levels of contact and as fathers were dispersed across the prison system, resulting in the loss of the supportive

rehabilitative culture that had been developed on the program. Accordingly, the failure to coordinate the delivery of an ‘end-to-end’ approach to prison rehabilitation appeared to undermine the potential long term effectiveness of the program.

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